DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 431 678 SO 030 816

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TITLE Service Learning: Perceptions of Preservice Teachers.
PUB DATE 1998-11-00
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (27th, New Orleans, LA, November 4-6, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Measures; *Dialog Journals; *Educational Benefits; Higher Education; Learning Processes; Preservice Teacher Education; *Preservice Teachers; Qualitative Research; *Service Learning; *Student Attitudes; Student Journals
IDENTIFIERS *Reflective Writing

ABSTRACT

Efforts are currently being made across the country to strengthen the connection between students' service learning experiences and course content at the university level. A study used qualitative data for gaining insight into preservice teachers' experiences and perceptions related to service learning. Subjects were undergraduate students enrolled in two sections of an early childhood course. Each student volunteered to work a minimum of 10 hours for an organization that serves children. Students reflected on their experiences by keeping dialogue journals and participating in two reflection sessions. At the end of the semester, students contemplated involvement in community service by responding to a set of open-ended questions in the form of a narrative reaction paper. Reaction papers were individually analyzed by two researchers for the purpose of identifying patterns or similarities in three broad areas of interest: (1) overall attitude, (2) learning that occurred, and (3) impact on university life. Following a collaborative analysis of research notes, findings were synthesized. Data analysis revealed a favorable perspective toward service learning. Academic benefits cited ranged from clarifying an individual's choice of major to observing or applying information present in university courses. Additionally, participants communicated learning outcomes in regard to each individual, the community, and children/adolescents. Contains 3 references. (BT)

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Service Learning: Perceptions of Preservice Teachers

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A paper presented at the Twenty-Seventh Annual Conference of the

Mid-South Educational Research Association

New Orleans, Louisiana

November 4 - 6, 1998

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Abstract

Service learning is defined by the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 as "... a method under which students ... learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that: is conducted in and meets the needs of the community and is coordinated with a ... community service program; helps foster civic responsibility; is integrated into and enhances that academic curriculum of the students ... and includes structured time for the students to reflect on the service experience" (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996, pg. 593). Efforts are currently being made across the country to strengthen the connection between student's service learning experiences and course content at the university level. This study used qualitative data for gaining insight into preservice teachers' experiences and perceptions related to service learning.

Subjects were undergraduate students (n = 56) enrolled in two sections of the course Early Childhood Education. Each student chose an organization serving children/adolescents with which to work and volunteered for a minimum of ten (10) hours. Students reflected on their experiences by keeping dialogue journals and participating in two reflection sessions. At the end of the semester, students contemplated the community service they completed by responding to a set of open-ended questions in the form of a narrative, reaction paper. Reaction papers were individually analyzed by two researchers for the purpose of identifying patterns or similarities in four broad areas of interest -- Overall Attitude, Learning that Occurred, and Impact on University Life. Following a collaborative analysis of the researchers' notes, a synthesis of findings was compiled.

Data analysis revealed an overwhelmingly favorable perspective toward service learning. Academic benefits cited ranged from clarifying one's choice of major to observing or applying information present in university courses. Additionally, participants communicated learning outcomes in regard to one's self, the community, and children/adolescents.

Introduction

The Presidents' Summit for America's Future was held in Philadelphia on April 27-29, 1997. Presidents Clinton, Carter, Bush and Ford, Vice-President Gore, and retired General Powell attended this summit, which thrust the idea of volunteerism by our America's young people into the national lime light. As a result, there is a current trend sweeping through higher education to link service and learning on college and university campuses across the country. Service learning is defined by the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 as " . . . a method under which students . . . learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that: is conducted in and meets the needs of the community and is coordinated with a . . . community service program; helps foster civic responsibility; is integrated into and enhances that academic curriculum of the students . . . and includes structured time for the students to reflect on the service experience" (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996, pg. 593). As institutions, administrators, and educators jump on the bandwagon to implement service learning components into the curriculum, it is important to consider students' reaction to participation in such programs.

The College of Health, Education, and Human Resources (CHEHR) at the University of Scranton was established in 1987 in response to the unique needs of students preparing to enter directly into a variety of professional fields, such a nursing, physical and occupational therapy, and teaching. Students presently enrolled in CHEHR must now complete a required number of service hours as a condition of graduation. This new requirement emanated from several sources and affirms the value of a long standing Catholic and Jesuit tradition of community service as a worthy learning experience for all students. Additionally, the College's pedagogy and curricula is

based on the belief that all disciplines be taught and understood through a balance of theory and application. Service learning tends to integrate these two important aspects of learning while augmenting the University's outreach and service to the local community (Pallante, 1995).

In order to meet the requirements for service learning stipulated by the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, particularly enhancing academic curriculum and providing time for structured reflection, efforts are currently underway at the University of Scranton to strengthen the connection between student's service learning experiences and course content. The purpose of this study was to use qualitative data for gaining insight into students' experiences and perceptions related to service learning as a requirement for the course Early Childhood Education.

Methodology

Subjects

The sample consisted of undergraduate students (n = 56) enrolled in two sections of the course Early Childhood Education during the Fall 1997 semester. This three credit course is described in the University catalog as "An introductory overview of the theory, research, and practice of early childhood education. Consideration will be given to the educational process from the fetal stages on through the first three years of life as well as the early years of schooling." This is a cognate course required for all Elementary and Early Childhood Education majors and appears on the degree plan during the first semester of the student's freshman year.

Of the fifty-six subjects, 51 were female, and four were male. Forty-two (75%) of subjects were freshman. In addition, there were 9 sophomores (16%), one junior (2%), and 4 seniors (7%) who served as subjects. The vast majority, 38, were elementary education majors

(68%). Other subjects majoring in education included 8 early childhood education majors (14%) and 2 secondary education majors (4%). The remaining subjects consisted of 4 psychology majors (7%) and 4 students who had not yet declared a major (7%).

Procedures

Each student chose an organization serving children and/or adolescents with which to work. This organization could be selected from those listed in the Community Service Opportunities booklet provided by the University's Office of Collegiate Volunteers or independently identified by the student. A few choices include Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Boys and Girls Club of Scranton, Day Nursery, Head Start, United Neighborhood Centers, and Village Park Apartments Educational Programs. To aid students in the selection process, a representative form the Office of Collegiate Volunteers came to class to discuss service options and distribute service learning contracts and time sheets.

Students were required to spend a minimum of ten (10) hours completing a service learning experience involving children between September 5 and December 1, 1997. Time spent in volunteer training and/or orientation was counted as part of the ten hour total. The allocation of service hours was individually designed by each student in consultation with the Service Learning Coordinator and the community agency personnel. Service hours could be completed in any combination of time providing contact is made at least twice and the total is at least ten (10) hours. For example, students could choose to volunteer 3 times for 3 hours 20 minutes each, 10 times for 1 hour each or in any other combination within the specified guidelines.

First contact was to be made prior to the return from semester break on October 15, 1997. For each contact, students completed a dialogue journal entry. The purpose of the dialogue

journal was to provide students with a written forum for (1) reflecting on the service experience, (2) making comments, observations or suggestions, and (3) asking questions or seeking advice.

Dialogue journal entries were made on loose-leaf paper in a designated section of the class notebook or a separate folder. Each entry was started on a new piece of paper, and students were to only write on one side of the paper. Journal entries were to be conversational in tone and to include the following information for each contact made:

1. Date/time spent in service
2. A description of pre-experience attitudes regarding the service option chosen
3. An objective or goal for the contact
4. Personal reaction to the experience
5. Comments pertaining to insights, new ideas, issues, points of confusions, etc.
6. Thoughts and feelings regarding the experience
7. A description of post-experience attitudes
8. Comments regarding how the experience relates to Early Childhood Education course content and/or academic study in other courses.

As the journals were designed to be interactive allowing for written communication between the instructor and students, they were periodically collected throughout the semester. Journals were returned to the students after the instructor responded to each entry.

In addition to completing dialogue journal entries, the students were provided with the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and/or feelings during two class session discussions concerning service learning. These reflection sessions were conducted by a representative from the Office of Collegiate Volunteers and allowed students to hear about others' experiences, share

thoughts and/or ideas, and verbally express concerns in both large and small group situations.

At the conclusion of the semester, students were instructed to write a 2-3 page reaction paper. Having completed the ten hour requirement and having attended both reflection session, students were to contemplate their total experience with the community service completed during the semester and respond to the experience in writing. Answerers to the following questions were to be included in the paper:

1. Describe your specific service learning experience. Where and when did you volunteer? What did you do? How many hours did you volunteer?
2. What did you learn from your service learning experience?
3. What was the most enjoyable part?
4. What was the least enjoyable part?
5. Did learning in the community effect your life here at the University? If so, how?

Data Collection and Analysis

The students' reaction papers served as data for this study. The constant comparative method (Glazer, 1978) was used for data analysis. As with all qualitative research designs, however, this study involved the combination of data collection with analysis.

A selection of twenty (20) reaction papers were read by the course instructor in order to identify key issues and recurring themes which would serve as categories of focus. These categories were Overall Attitude, Learning that Occurred, and Impact on Life at the University. All fifty-six papers were then analyzed individually by two researchers--the course instructor and a Collegiate Volunteer's representative--for the purpose of exploring the many dimensions revealed under each of the identified categories and simultaneously searching for additional

patterns or areas of similarity in the subject's responses.

As a result of this process, three additional categories--Reactions to Journals and Reflection Sessions, Difficulties Experienced, and Plans to Continue Volunteering--were identified and added to the emerging model. The data were in turn analyzed, coded, and written about by each of the researchers until a point of theoretical saturation was reached. The two researchers then compared notes to find areas of commonality. A synthesis of these findings was compiled as a result of this collaborative analysis.

Results

Data analysis revealed that students' Overall Attitude towards service learning experience could be placed into one of three sub-categories--highly beneficial (80%), possessing some merit (18%), and ineffectual (2%). The forty-five (45) students categorized as depicting service learning as a highly beneficial activity used words such as "fun" or "enjoyable" (14 times), "great" (13 times), and "rewarding" (9 times) to describe their experiences. One student described service learning as "one of the most enjoyable and rewarding experiences of the semester" while another student commented that " . . . volunteering helps people grow emotionally and learn real life lessons about others, themselves, and their future profession. I am very grateful for this chance to explore and learn about children and education, and I would definitely encourage everyone to partake in something similar. . ." Two of the ten students categorized as seeing some merit to participating in service learning commented that service should be strictly volunteer. One of the two students stated that, "The least enjoyable part of my service learning was knowing that I was required to volunteer and not just that I could go whenever I choose no matter how many hours I had done." The single student who found service

learning to be ineffectual asserted that, "All it really did was take up my free time."

Fifteen students (27%) experienced a positive change in attitude during their participation in service learning. Despite initially feeling "anxious," "apprehensive," "uncomfortable," and "nervous," these students became accustomed to their placements and found the experience increasing valuable as their hours accumulated. One student commented, "I went to the center expecting the worst and came out with the best." Five of these students attributed their preliminary hesitation to "tight schedules" and "time restraints" while others cited lack of confidence and unclear expectations as reasons for concern. In the words of one doubting student, " . . . before I started this service learning, I felt that I needed to act differently around the children, like they would intimidate me or something. Once I got there and began working with them one on one, everything changed."

Learning That Occurred as a result of service learning was also classified into the three sub-categories--learning about self, learning about the community, and learning about children and/or adolescents. Forty-seven students (84%) indicated that they gained knowledge about themselves by participating in service learning. Twenty-one of these students discovered that they possessed qualities associated with effective teachers. The characteristic most often mentioned was that of having patience (13 times). Examples of other advantageous features students recognized within themselves included caring about children, being a good listener, and being able to communicate effectively with children. Thirteen students realized that they needed to work on acquiring and/or improving certain abilities needed by teachers, and four of the thirteen expressed realizing that they were better suited to work with upper elementary students. One such student explained that "I have learned, changed, and even matured because of my

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[service learning] experience and realized that I would rather work with older school-age children instead of preschool."

Forty-one students (73%) increased their awareness of the community, and forty-nine students (88%) broadened their understanding of children. The most common observation regarding community involved the amount of diversity which exists within the community (21 times) and among the children (17 times) That individuals in the community appeared to care about area children (15 times) and displayed a welcoming attitude toward volunteers (7 times) was also frequently mentioned. Other observations regarding children pertained to their "curious" and "inquisitive" nature (9 times), the ways they are influence by the adults in their surroundings (6 times), and their "accepting" and "non-judgmental" attitudes (5 times).

Students reported service learning impacting their life at the University in several ways--confirmed choice of major (66%), initiated questions regarding choice of major (7%), clarified information or presented examples of content addressed in Early Childhood Education (38%), and influenced other courses or University studies in general (50%).

Thirty-one of the thirty-seven students whose choice of major was confirmed through their service learning experience made general comments regarding the realization. Such as, "I now know that I definitely want to teach." "Teaching is what I want to do with the rest of my life," "I'm in the right field," and "I've chosen the most appropriate path for my future." One student remarked that "Through this challenge, I learned that I have many ideas to contribute to the field of education and to my students." The six remaining students noted that their experiences with service learning helped them narrow their options within their chosen major. For example, "Working with two different age groups reinforced my desire to work with young

children" or "I want to work with upper-elementary students who are more independent." Another student explained that "Before I started service learning, I wanted to be a fourth or fifth grade teacher. Now, I realize working with young children seems to be my strong point." Of the four students who reported that the experience caused them to question their choice of major, two revealed difficulty relating to children and feelings of uncertainty in their ability to teach while two initiated procedures to change to secondary education during their experiences.

In regard to Early Childhood Education content, nine of the twenty-one students felt that "These experiences brought early childhood education to life. My knowledge of the material taught during class was made real. Therefore, I comprehended the information better because I had many hands-on experiences to which I could relate." "Service learning helped me see what we learned actually applied in a professional world," and "It [service learning] allowed me to take what I knew from lecture and apply it in the community." There were, however, several references to specific information presented in class, such as room arrangement/centers (8 times), the ideas of Montessori (4 times), developmentally appropriate practice (4 times) and discipline techniques (3 times).

Twenty-eight students report that service learning generally influenced their University studies, and all indicated that the influence was positive. Seven students felt that participating in service learning increased there awareness of diversity and that their lives had been enriched through interaction with a wide variety of individuals, both children and adults, in the community. These students made reference to gaining "a different perspective" and "understanding people and their beliefs at a new level." The value of student-community member teamwork was aptly expressed by a student who stated that "I feel the members of the community

helped to shape my college life into a well-balanced academic and professional time." Six students referred to the benefit volunteering offers in terms of providing hands-on learning experience. In the words of one student, "Instead of just reading books to get information, now you are able to be there and experience it for yourself." Five students commented on their increased ability to successfully balance responsibilities and manage their time effectively. Similarly, five students commented that they appreciated the opportunity to distance themselves from the University campus and school related commitments. One student referred to the time she spent volunteering each week as a "two-hour vacation" while another student explained that "When you are in college, your world does not extend much further than the campus boundaries. This service learning experience in the community gives students a touch, even if it is a small touch, with the outside world." It was also stated that "Getting out and doing service learning in the community helps you see what the college is offering you." Four students agreed that service learning made them value the educational opportunities that they were currently receiving.

All three students (5%) who mentioned their dialogue journals commented positively toward keeping a written record of their experience. Likewise, all seven students (13%) who referred to the reflection sessions shared the opinion that these sessions were beneficial. These students cited the chance to hear about different service learning options (5 times) and the opportunity to share common concerns (4 times) as being the two reasons that they found these sessions helpful. One student described her reaction to participating in these sessions as follows: "Through the reflection sessions, I have realized that I have similar thoughts and fears about teaching as do my peers."

Despite the widespread consensus among participants that there were more advantageous

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than adversive components of their service learning, thirty-five (63%) students remarked that they encountered at least minimal difficulty with some aspect of the experience. The most common complaint, addressed by thirteen students, was having feelings of frustration. Seven of these students attributed their frustration to a lack of authority. According to one such student, "There were things that I wanted to do and things that I wanted to change, but I could not because I was not in a position to do so." The remaining five students experienced frustration at their inability to amend situations beyond their control, such as the amount of poverty witnessed. Six students reported periodically feeling useless or unneeded while six students found leaving the service learning cite at the completion of their hours to be a strenuous task. Two students encountered problems finding transportation to their service learning cites, and two students expressed dissatisfaction at being "forced" to volunteer.

Eighteen students (32%) communicated a desire to continue volunteering in the future, and one student boldly announced that "I hope to continue doing community service for the rest of my life."

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that service in the community can be a valuable learning experience for preservice teachers. This interpretation is based on the fact that despite reported difficulties, 80% of the participants indicated that they viewed their volunteer hours as a valuable learning experience. Also, a vast majority of students reported increased knowledge in regard to themselves (84%), their community (73%), and children/adolescents (88%) as a result of their participation in service learning.

A critical issue addressed by several participants in this study is the idea of the "forced

volunteer." Although institutions of higher education have historically acknowledged a commitment to preparing socially responsible citizens, mandating service may not be the answer. Making it a requirement to serve removes the element of free will, which is by definition associated with volunteering, and, possibly, many of the cited benefits.

When discussing community service as a teaching strategy, it is important to keep in mind that the service learning movement is still in its infancy at many colleges and universities. By implementing service learning requirements, university educators have committed themselves to a bold endeavor that, with patient nurturing and institutional support, will produce graduates who enter professions having experienced humanism within a directly relevant context. As educators integrate service learning in their courses and receive continual training and recognition for their efforts, it is anticipated that undergraduates students, regardless of their field, will be engaged in meeting the objectives traditionally associated with higher education--intellectual and personal growth, critical inquiry, the development of communal values, and an examination of the relationship between theory and practice.

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